

Latimer's Curate

They say that the hardest command is to love people. I've no doubt that's true—I often wonder why people in church don't love me more.

But just lately as I've been sitting in the pew casting my mind's eye around I have been pondering a specific application of this: where does the role of the loving rebuke fit in? Jesus said 'If your brother sins rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him'. Luke 17:3.

The more I've thought about this (as I consider a few who could do with one) the more I've come to think that a scriptural command has been conveniently sidelined.

Complaining about someone—yes. Annoyance at someone—definitely. But personal rebuke face-to-face for a sin committed? It's too difficult (when most of us are desperate for an easier life), too confrontational (when most of us want a peaceful life) and too risky (when most of us want a blame-free life).

It seems there are three options in terms of what to do with the command.

First, ignore it. This is the current favoured option I see most of the time in my church. Yours?

Ignoring the command plays into the wonderful superficiality of church life, something in which I personally excel. Morning tea in particular is an open opportunity to exhibit such skin deep honesty that real issues can be easily skated over with nothing more than benign politeness and a perma-smile.

The consequences of not addressing sins, it is slowly dawning on me, may be more serious than first imagined.

Not least, the person goes on committing them! Think of the archetypal nightmare in the bible study—the person whose self-obsession manifests itself in verbal diarrhoea so out of control that people year after year are literally drowned in it. Ouch. And no one takes the person aside and explains the problem.

The knock on effects continue—mounting frustrations with the person because their

behaviour goes unchecked; the behaviour gradually threatens to turn into a habit, and one they are now comfortable with because they think it acceptable for a Christian to behave in this way—no one has told them otherwise.

This has the unfortunate benefit of making it harder for someone to rebuke them later—the person committing the offence must think others consider it acceptable because 'no one has ever complained before'.

The problem is therefore lumped back onto the person trying now to say the rebuke—who has been let down by brothers and sisters who had the chance to say something and whose courage failed them. Think how many people out of kindness have failed to tell you and me a hard truth we needed to hear—especially you!

The second way to approach the command is to obey it, but to do so in the wrong way—not completely uncommon.

This generally entails a build-up of frustrations over a long period of time between congregation member A at congregation member B's behaviour. This ensures that if the issue ever is addressed it is done so in an environment of toxicity and exaggeration on the one side ('you're always like this', 'you've never thought about anyone else') and ignorance from the other ('no one else seems to have had a problem with me', 'you've never had a problem with this before').

A variation with this approach is where the rebuke is done out of a wrong motive—to let off some steam, to simply show them they were wrong, to pursue a line of justice. Where there is no compassion for the sinner it will almost certainly come across in a manner likely to heighten tension and maximise offence.

The third approach is to do it the right way—out of the love that has the other person's best interests clearly at heart, and in a straightforward, gentle manner likely to commend a word in season.

The only problem is...I have not seen an example of this in my current church. Have you? And are you part of the problem or the solution in this?